



Mama G

Every spring, the man I live with puts out a long, narrow dock that runs through the bulrushes clear out to where the water gets deep. Deep enough that you might snag a sunny or a bluegill on a pleasant evening. Deep enough that seeking a little respite, on a hot summer day you might dive off that dock, down into the cold water of a crystal clear lake. Being a little less picky, your Number One swimming dog might spend a lifetime diving off that dock, on hot days, cool rainy days, and most days in between.

On nice mornings, I like to take a cup of coffee out to the end of that dock and just sit a while. You see some interesting stuff, if you're willing to wait. The other day I watched a pair of loons. They were kind of unusual, in that they were swimming in the shallow water, picking their way through the bulrushes. One kept up a short, mournful call. I wondered if she didn't lose a chick. There's an eagle that likes to work the south end of that lake. Young loons are definitely on the menu, as the eagle has babies to feed, too.

It's that time of year when you're liable to see all sorts of young wildlife. I came across a grouse brood the other day, just tiny fluff balls along the side of the road. On our way to some friends' place, we happened upon a pair of swans and 3 tiny signets as they made their way across a small gravel road and back into the water of a welcoming stream. I see a "colt" has joined a familiar pair of sandhill cranes. Keep your speed down and look around a little, and you might be surprised what all is out there.

Near the dock there's the largest brood of goldeneye ducklings I have ever seen. They're kind of tough to count, because they are as yet quite small, and always moving around. It seems like maybe there are 18 of them. It's got us to wondering. How can a little duck like a goldeneye produce so many ducklings? Can she possibly be sitting on all those eggs? My father-in-law is thinking that they might be kind of hard on the fish. Curious about that, I looked into it.

As it turns out, this little diving duck breeds worldwide in northern boreal forests. Very cold-hardy, the common goldeneye is at the southern end of its breeding range here in northern Minnesota, with the greatest Minnesota nesting abundance found in places like Itasca county. In the spring, you may hear the courtship calls of the goldeneye as they snap their heads about. They sound something like a nighthawk, sort of a nasal 'pee-ik'. Also called "whistlers", the goldeneye's wings make a distinctive whistling sound while in flight. Cold weather accentuates the sound.

Our hen goldeneye is rather plain, with a grey body and brown head. But the drakes in breeding plumage have a more dramatic look of white and black, with a green head and prominent white spot near the bill. That golden eye for which the duck is named is actually gray-brown at hatching. Their eyes turn various colors of purple, blue, and green as the ducklings age, until finally they are yellow in adult birds. Who knew?

Rather spunky, the goldeneye turns out to be an aggressive and territorial duck, and often dominates interactions with its competitor species for food and nest sites. The goldeneye is a cavity nester and needs pretty big trees, likely at least 20 inches minimum tree diameter. They line an abandoned woodpecker cavity found near the water with down. The availability of nest cavities is reported to be the most important factor limiting populations of common goldeneyes. Development of lake shore property in the goldeneye breeding range is likely to have had negative impacts on goldeneyes, as has forestry practices which result in reductions in mature, riparian forests.

Riparian forests occur in that transition area between aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Among the most diverse parts of forest ecosystems, riparian areas provide important habitat for many wildlife species. The goldeneye is just one example. On the Chippewa National Forest, a Forest Plan and the Minnesota Forest Resources Council Forest Management Guidelines provide guidance for appropriate management of riparian areas to ensure the provision of habitat values.

Common goldeneyes generally breed around clear water with good visibility, needed as they dive for food. In the winter, they are mostly sea ducks, mainly living along the coasts, but also on the Great Lakes, and on some large inland lakes and rivers. Their diet varies with the season and habitat. Our breeding goldeneyes are feeding primarily on aquatic invertebrates such as insects and mollusks. Caddisfly larva, water boatmen, beetles, dragonfly nymphs, and mayflies are favored foods. The availability of abundant invertebrate prey seems to be important as these ducks select habitat. Some fish species, like the yellow perch, compete with goldeneyes for invertebrate food.

Common goldeneyes defend fixed breeding territories, and the females also defend brood territories. In Minnesota, these brood territories seem to move along shorelines, probably in response to food resources. Hen goldeneyes tend to return to the same nest sites year after year. Only one brood is produced in a year, with generally 7 to 10 eggs laid. But especially when cavities are scarce, goldeneyes will lay their eggs in other goldeneye nests or even in the nests of other cavity-nesting ducks. The “host” hen does not defend her nest against other hens, but will desert the nest if too many eggs accumulate. It seems the nest success is only reduced when the total clutch size exceeds 16 – 20 eggs.

The other way goldeneye hens accumulate large broods is through “creching” after the brood has left the nest. This can happen in a couple of ways. Some females abandon their broods soon after hatching, and their ducklings then merge with other broods. Some hens lose ducklings during territorial disputes with another hen. When the females are fighting the young scatter, and when the fight is over not everybody gets back with whom they belong.

Apparently, young goldeneyes do not require a lot of maternal attention. They can feed themselves, and primarily require protection, although in the first couple of weeks after hatching the female may “brood” her young at night or during bad weather. Hens sitting on eggs and young ducklings are vulnerable to predation. Black bears, pine martens, mink, and raccoons are predators of incubating hens. Northern flickers and red squirrels will take the eggs. And hens with their broods are preyed upon by hawks and owls, bald eagles, and big fish like the northern pike. It’s a tough world for tiny ducklings, and brood survival is low. Most goldeneye duckling mortality happens in their first week. By the time the ducklings are 4 – 5 weeks old, they are abandoned by their hens.

Overall, keeping our water clean and our riparian forests in tact with plenty of large trees and snags to provide nesting cavities will help this species and many others into the future.

Lately I’ve been picking my way around somebody’s poop as I make my way on out to the bench at the end of the dock. That’s nothing new, but I had been kind of curious as to what was going on while I was not around.

As I sat on the dock the other morning, I gradually became aware that the goldeneye and her brood were in the area. Eighteen tiny ducklings make a bit of a stir as they work their way through the bulrushes, popping up and down as they dive into the water like little floaty bath toys. The busy little guys even jump up out of the water as they grab at insects on the bulrushes. Every now and then, the hen would see something she didn’t like, and set up a ruckus, splashing wildly to and fro, distracting the potential danger while her brood clusters up.

It got quiet, and I lost track of things as they moved along. But after a while I got the sense I was perhaps being watched. Turning, I caught a peak of the hen goldeneye resting on the dock, her busy brood feeding down in the water, as yet perhaps unable to join her up on the high ground. Hidden by the bulrushes, you wouldn’t know they were there except for the movements. The mystery of the poop is solved. It’s Mama G, having a little time out.



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